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A SMALL COUNTRY WITH A BIG HEART

– *Your Excellency, given the experience of European integration of Montenegro, what lessons should Ukraine consider in pursuing its course towards EU accession?*

– Montenegro remains a leader on the path towards the EU among the Western Balkan countries. The newly elected President Jakov Milatović, Prime Minister Dritan Abazović, and most political forces that entered the Parliament after the early elections on 11 June 2023 have all reaffirmed their commitment to this path. Negotiations on EU accession began on 29 June 2012, and since then, the country has opened 33 negotiation chapters, with only three provisionally closed. Montenegro's priorities in European integration are quite evident: tackling organised crime, undertaking comprehensive judicial reform, countering corruption, and ensuring the rule of law. Such tasks are extremely pertinent, not only for Montenegro but also for the entire South-Eastern Europe. They are completely understandable for Ukraine as well.

The exchange of experience between Ukrainian and Montenegrin institutions on this matter is crucial. Ukraine should thoroughly study the accomplishments of Montenegro and the difficulties it encountered on its path to full EU membership. Undoubtedly, the European development path unites both countries.

– *How has the Ukrainian community in Montenegro changed since the onset of russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine? What challenges do Ukrainians in Montenegro face, and how does the Embassy of Ukraine respond to them?*

– Montenegro does not have a historically constituted Ukrainian diaspora, unlike several neighbouring countries in South-Eastern Europe. The estimated number of Ukrainians residing here was around 2,000 people before 24 February 2022. However, since the beginning of russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, our community has notably been enlarged by displaced individuals who have found a welcoming refuge from the aggressor in Montenegro. Furthermore, the challenges posed by wartime circumstances prompted local Ukrainians to unite and make their status official.

At one point in 2022, Montenegro hosted the largest number of Ukrainian citizens among all European countries in percentage terms of its population (approximately 5%). Currently, around 10,000 Ukrainians reside here. We take pride in the fact that our community in Montenegro has reached a significantly new level of self-organisation over the past year and a half, and its activity can serve as an example for many other countries in the region.

– *What role does the Embassy play in the effective development of the Ukrainian community in Montenegro and in ensuring decent conditions for it? Are there any joint projects that you take pride in?*

– The cooperation between the Embassy and the community is at a high and, I would say, friendly level. Our diplomatic mission has played a pivotal and effective role in the organisational and legal establishment of the Ukrainian community in the first half of 2022. I would like to highlight the substantial importance of the then heads of the Embassy, especially the Consular Department, in this process. Their dedication, initiative, and hard work throughout the spring and summer of 2022 led to the creation of a network of crisis headquarters initially to assist Ukrainians. Subsequently, four Ukrainian Centres were founded in Podgorica, Budva, Herceg Novi, and Bar. Currently, the only Ukrainian NGO in Montenegro is the Dobra Sprava charitable foundation, established in the spring of 2022.

We highly value the determination, enthusiasm, and patriotism of our local community, for whom the tragic events of February 2022 became a powerful incentive for further strengthening. It is also worth noting the constructive position taken by Montenegro's leadership, with whom we effectively cooperate on matters relevant to the Ukrainian community, particularly in the educational sphere.

– *What events has the Embassy organised for our citizens in Montenegro since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine?*

– One of the most notable events in this regard was the charity festival Days of Ukraine in Montenegro, held in the historical capital of Cetinje on 25–26 June 2022. This significant occasion garnered considerable attention from both the local Ukrainian community and our Montenegrin friends. It is also worth mentioning the regular marches in support of Ukraine, which are organised by the Embassy, the Ukrainian community, and friendly Montenegrins in today's capital of Podgorica on important Ukrainian holidays (including the Independence Day of Ukraine). In the abovementioned city of Cetinje, joint Montenegrin-Ukrainian solidarity marches occur monthly, and they happened daily during the first 100 days of the full-scale war. Over the past year and a half, the Embassy has arranged a series of art exhibitions, book presentations, and concerts by various artists, including the renowned American pianist and composer of Ukrainian origin, Vadim Neselovskyi. The Dobra Sprava NGO also deserves recognition for consistently hosting events for adults and children at the four Ukrainian Centres. We express gratitude to Ukrainian entrepreneurs in Montenegro, particularly the leaders of Zapad Banka, for their financial contributions to specific projects.

In light of the substantial increase of Ukrainians residing in Montenegro last year, we are now observing a trend of decrease in the numbers, as some individuals choosing to return home. As an Embassy, we actively support repatriation,

understanding that our citizens are reuniting with their families and participating in the reconstruction of their homes and the country. Nevertheless, a notable part of Ukrainians opts to remain in Montenegro. They are primarily individuals with family ties with Montenegrins or business interests, with nowhere to return due to destruction or occupation of their homes. It is of great importance for us to maintain strong bond between these individuals and Ukraine by cherishing our cultural traditions and consistently organising relevant events.

– *Mr Ambassador, do you observe russian informational, political, and other influences in Montenegro? How does the Embassy counter kremlin narratives?*

– The russian activity in Montenegro has noticeably increased, and we observe daily attempts by the russian embassy to overcome the media and institutional barriers it faced after 24 February 2022 as a diplomatic representation of an aggressor state. It is essential to highlight that russia adheres to its traditional patterns. Moreover, nearly all interviews conducted by the russian ambassador are permeated with chauvinism, condescension, audacity, and an overtly arrogant perception of Montenegrins as ‘younger siblings’ moving towards the West rather than becoming kremlin satellites. The russian ambassador openly questions Montenegro’s sovereignty, national priorities, and geopolitical strategy in the region. According to the russian perspective, anything Western is deemed negative, and only the ‘russian world’ is perceived as ‘freedom’, leading to the russian ambassador lamenting the ‘unconscious’ civilisational choice of the Balkan state and being perhaps utterly unaware of how offensive his rhetoric is.

Leading Montenegrin media outlets report on the russian-Ukrainian war with considerable tact and objectivity. However, several marginal pro-russian portals propagate kremlin narratives. It is safe to say that Ukraine dominates the information battle with russia in Montenegro.

As for our Embassy, we are developing a proper communication strategy. We strive to keep the public informed about events on the frontlines and the evolving political and diplomatic resistance against russian aggression, hold great regard for Montenegro’s national interests and European choice, and cover the development of Ukrainian-Montenegrin relations. Recently, we focused our efforts on spotlighting the implications of russia’s withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative and the potential risks it introduces to global food security, particularly for African and Asian countries. Our Embassy actively covered this issue on our web resources and in Montenegrin media outlets.

– *What is the public opinion in Montenegro regarding the war in Ukraine and Ukrainian displaced persons?*

– We should acknowledge that there are indeed pro-russian sentiments within Montenegrin society. Fortunately, this pertains to a particular minority and can be attributed mainly to the historical ties between Montenegro and the

russian empire, coupled with a slightly mythologised and romanticised perception of russia held by certain Montenegrin citizens. Furthermore, we should consider that russia has been building a network of its influence agents for years, especially in Eastern and South-Eastern European countries.

Nevertheless, the vast majority of Montenegrins understand the reasons behind this war, recognise russia's aggressive actions, and are well aware of the horrific crimes committed by the occupiers in Ukraine. Ultimately, all sane people realise that no historical ties can justify the atrocities committed by russians in Ukraine.

– *As of February 2023, Montenegro has provided Ukraine with humanitarian and military aid totalling more than EUR 10 million since the start of full-scale russian aggression. How challenging is it for the Embassy to facilitate political support, defence, and other aid from this Balkan country?*

– As I always emphasise, Montenegro is a small country with a big heart. We highly value all the political support, military and technical, material, and humanitarian aid provided by Montenegro. Remarkably, this support stands entirely unaffected by any shifts in the government. Montenegro's political stance remains resolute, firmly evidenced by the recent statements of President Jakov Milatović and the leaders of the main political forces, with whom I had the pleasure of meeting not long ago. The newly elected Parliament of Montenegro is about to begin its full-fledged work, followed by practical steps in forming the next government. We are convinced that Montenegro's unwavering support for Ukraine will persist even under new circumstances.

We take pride in that Montenegro has allocated 11% of its previous year's military budget to support Ukraine and seeks opportunities to further provide assistance, albeit Montenegrin limited capabilities.

– *What areas do you deem promising for cooperation between Ukraine and Montenegro considering the current economic landscape?*

– Over the past year and a half, we have observed a noticeable decline in economic cooperation between Ukraine and Montenegro, evident in both trade and tourism (traditionally, many Ukrainians visited Montenegro). The reasons for this decline are apparently interwoven with russian armed aggression against Ukraine. Nevertheless, despite the challenging circumstances, we continue to work on developing and concluding bilateral agreements in the customs area, expanding the existing free trade zone, etc. Ongoing negotiations lay a steady foundation for the future.

We entertain the hope for enhanced trade between Ukraine and Montenegro and expect Montenegrins to travel to Ukraine once the war ends. Another promising aspect of our economic relations is the saturation of the Montenegrin market with Ukrainian food products and agricultural goods, as the Montenegrin authorities have expressed keen interest in this prospect.

– *Is there a discussion on cooperation between Ukraine and Montenegro regarding the reconstruction of our state? What assistance do you think Montenegro could provide?*

– Montenegro receives international aid, thus lacking the substantial capacity for investing in the Ukrainian economy. However, it extends political, humanitarian, and military-technical assistance to Ukraine. The prospect of Montenegro's involvement in Ukraine's reconstruction is actively deliberated. For example, the Prime Minister of Montenegro Dritan Abazović conveyed the country's readiness to provide equipment and funding for the post-war recovery of Ukraine during a joint visit to Ukraine with Edi Rama, Prime Minister of the Republic of Albania, on 15 June 2022. The Prime Minister of Montenegro reaffirmed this commitment during the London Ukraine Recovery Conference in London on 21–22 June 2023.

Consultations among relevant authorities are ongoing regarding a joint initiative involving Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia aimed at the reconstruction of several Ukrainian settlements affected by Russian armed aggression. We will consistently pay intense attention to this direction.